

# The first labor strike in America



Director of Education  
Jamie Lumm

**I**f you attended school in the United States, you were likely taught about the early English settlers arriving in the Americas and founding the first permanent colony in Jamestown. I'm sure you have heard the tale of Captain Smith and Pocahontas, even if only from the Disney animated film. However, I'm just as sure that you were never taught that Jamestown was also the site of the first labor strike in America. Here's that story.

**Spain and Portugal had pretty** much dominated the exploration and colonization of the Americas for the 100 years following Columbus' arrival in 1492 and, within a few years, had laid claim to all of South and Central America and Mexico. By the mid-1500s, they had explored and established outposts in what is now the southern U.S. from California to Florida. Somewhat late to the party, England and France also sent explorers to the new world during the latter half of the 1500s. France focused its attention mostly on what is now Eastern Canada, establishing colonies in Quebec, Nova Scotia, Labrador and Newfoundland, while the English established settlements along the Atlantic coast from Maine to Georgia.

After several failed attempts by England to establish a permanent colony in America, three ships set sail with 105 settlers and 39 crewmen in December 1606. Among them was Captain John Smith, a 27-year old mercenary soldier. Following a long voyage, they landed at the site of present-day Virginia Beach in late April 1607. After searching for several weeks to find a suitable location to establish their community, they settled on a piece of land about 40 miles upriver.

The first British settlers arrived with the hope of finding natural resources such as gold, lumber and herbs, carrying with them their ultimate goal: profit. Sent by the Virginia Company of London, they arrived with large expectations. However, their inability to settle a colony was even larger. Two problems immediately beset the colonists. First, many were English noblemen with no experience either in the military or in manual labor. Thus, the colony found itself without skilled craftsmen or soldiers; worse, many of the colonists outright refused to engage in work that they felt was beneath them. To this, Captain Smith, who was the colony's leader, said, "He that will not work, shall not eat."

Second, the physical location chosen for the site of Jamestown proved to be a poor one. The land was swampy, making it a veritable breeding ground of disease; the water supply was poor and relations with the local indigenous Indian tribes were rocky at best. Within a year, the colony was in danger of failure. No profits were heading back to England; disease ran rampant, food supplies were low, and little to no work had been done to establish an industrial base. The Virginia Company of London had nothing to show for its investment and a small prospect for future returns. Within six months, 60 of the 105 settlers had died.

**To salvage their colony, the Virginia Company hired a group** of Poles, known for their reputation and valuable expertise in the lumber and other manufacturing industries. Captain

John Smith had firsthand experience dealing with Polish manufacturers through his work with the Virginia Company of London, in addition to his experience traveling through Poland on his return from the Middle East, where he had fought for Austria against the Ottoman Turks. Before his travels to America, Captain Smith had been a Turkish prisoner and Poland provided him with his first refuge following his escape.

The first Poles arrived at Jamestown in October 1608, bringing with them the skilled labor and military experience absent among the original colonists; among these were the manufacturing of glass, pitch, tar, soap, ash and other products. In addition, while the British settlers coming to America were mainly social outcasts, some fleeing England for religious freedom, the Poles were well acquainted with the methods of production needed at the time of Jamestown and they had no hang-ups about doing the important manual labor needed to preserve the survival of the colony.

While the colonists viewed the Poles as hardworking and respectful, the Poles' first impressions of Jamestown were not very positive. One observed, "Seldom has one seen such lack of resourcefulness as we found in Virginia. Not even a spoonful of drinking water. The people here marveled when we dug a well and presented it to them." Among the major accomplishments of the first Poles was the building of a glass furnace, the first factory in America and the beginning of an industry. The goods produced in these factories became the first "made in America" goods to be exported to England and, within a few years, the colony was firmly established.

**The colonists respected the Poles for their quality of** work and other accomplishments. However, in June 1619, when the Jamestown Legislative Assembly instituted a representative form of government, rules stated that only colonists of English descent would be given the right to vote. This denied Poles the right to governmental representation in a colony they helped to sustain and grow. As a result, the Polish craftsmen organized what became the first labor strike in American history. Harking to Captain Smith's edict a decade earlier, their slogan was "No vote, no work."

Since nearly all of the profits realized by the London Company came from the resale of the products of the Polish industries, the Jamestown government quickly realized that if it sent empty ships back to England, the consequences could be very unpleasant. Within a few weeks, the Jamestown government bowed to the demands of the Poles, granting them the same rights given to all workers within the colony. While not a strike by a union against an employer, these Polish craftsmen acting in solidarity used the economic power they had acquired through their labor to craft an equal footing for themselves as citizens.

## 2018 Leadership Academy application period

The application acceptance period for the 2018 Leadership Academy will be from Jan. 1 through Feb. 28, 2018. Those interested in attending the Academy in 2018 must apply during this period. Previous applicants who wish to be considered must reapply. Additional information about the Academy, including application forms, will be available on the NALC website in December.